

FWP COMMISSION AGENDA ITEM COVER SHEET

Meeting Date: November 10, 2011

Agenda Item: Johnson Ranch Conservation Easement

Division: Wildlife\Fisheries

Action Needed: Preliminary Endorsement

Time Needed on Agenda for this Presentation: 5 minutes

Background

FWP proposed to allocate \$100,000 of Habitat Montana funds to secure a conservation easement on the Johnston Ranch (about 2,500 acres) in the Big Hole drainage. This funding will support a North American Wetlands Conservation Council proposal, which was submitted in March 2008 by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program in partnership with FWP. The NAWCA proposal, titled the "Big Hole Restoration and Protection II Project," was approved by the Migratory Bird Conservation Commission for \$1 million in September 2009. The Habitat Montana funding for this project would be used as match for the NAWCA funding and to assist with purchasing a conservation easement on the Johnson Ranch with FWP holding the easement.

The Johnson Ranch property is located 12 miles south of Wisdom, at the mouth of Little Lake Creek. About 2 miles of Little Lake Creek, 1.5 miles of the Big Swamp Creek and 0.5 miles of Miner Creek flows within the ranch's boundaries. The Montana Comprehensive Fish and Wildlife Conservation Strategy recognizes the Big Hole River Valley as a terrestrial and aquatic conservation focus area. The meandering river corridor sustains core riparian and wetland habitats and harbors some of the most diverse communities of aquatic, terrestrial, and avian species in Montana. The Johnson Ranch includes important habitat for the Big Hole fluvial Arctic grayling population and the Johnson family has been an active participant in grayling conservation efforts. The property also includes intermountain grassland ecotype, which supports an abundance of wildlife species including elk, moose, wolves, and black bears. Elk make frequent use of the Johnson property as calving and summer range. Moose use the property year-round due to the abundance of wetlands. The property is home to numerous bird species of concern such as the American bald eagle, long-billed curlew and sandhill crane. The Johnson Ranch allows access to the public for hunting and angling and is currently enrolled in Block Management.

Public Involvement and Process Results

Upon endorsement, FWP will draft an environmental assessment for the proposed Johnson Ranch conservation easement with a 30-day public comment period.

Alternatives and Analysis

Under the No Action Alternative, FWP would not take advantage of this opportunity to leverage FWP funding with the NAWCA funding and acquire the conservation easement. FWP does not know the landowner's response in terms of future land ownership and land management, but future sale and subdivision would be more likely than under the proposed action.

Agency Recommendation and Rationale

FWP recommends preliminary endorsement by the FWP Commission to proceed with developing a conservation easement for this property to protect and enhance habitats for numerous fish and wildlife species.

Proposed Motion

I move the Commission endorse FWP acquisition of a conservation easement on the Johnson Ranch.